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## Component II: Effective Collaboration

Research suggests that most organizations can benefit and improve by developing a collaborative culture (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 1999; Goddard, Goddard & Taschannen-Moran, 2007). A collaborative culture is a distinguishing feature of effective schools (Lipson et al, 2004), and a necessary condition for successful multi-tiered systems.

<b>Operating Assumptions:</b>	Specifically refer to Guiding Principles 7, 9, 10
<b>Key Definitions:</b>	Refer to the Glossary for the following terms: <i>Collaboration</i> <i>Collaborative Team</i> <i>Collaborative Team Process</i> <i>Problem Solving Team</i> <i>School Culture</i>

### The Significance of an Effective Collaborative School Culture

Research indicates that an effective collaborative school culture impacts teaching and learning in positive ways:

- Schools organized around democratic and collaborative cultures produce students with higher achievement and better levels of skills and understanding than do traditionally organized schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997).
- Student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative work cultures that foster a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continuously on improving instructional practice in light of student performance data, and link to standards and staff development support (Fullan, 1999).
- There is a positive relationship between collaborative school culture and student achievement in reading and math. This suggests the value of efforts to improve student achievement by promoting teacher collaboration around curriculum, instruction and professional development (Goddard et al., 2007; Lipson, et al, 2004).
- School-wide coordinated efforts to address behavior have led to reductions in problem behaviors and increases in positive interactions between teachers and students, perceptions of organizational health, and instructional time (Chaparro et al., 2012).
- Collaboration has been identified as a core variable underlying reported district-wide gains in the implementation of reading and behavioral initiatives (Sadler & Sugai, 2009).
- When parents, teachers, students and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students (Epstein et al., 2002).

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### Characteristics of Schools with Effective Collaborative Cultures

In schools with effective collaborative cultures, both educators and students learn. Building administrators, and others engaged in leadership activities, create systems and supports that encourage teachers to work collaboratively with each other and with the administration to teach students so they learn more (Fullan, 1997; Newman & Wehlage, 1995). Educators in schools with effective collaborative school cultures:

- share a clear mission and vision;
- focus on student learning (standards and objectives) and on results;
- accept a collective responsibility for student learning;
- value the interchange of ideas with colleagues;
- hold high expectations of everyone, including themselves; and
- engage in professional and purposeful collaborative activities.

Schools that use learning communities (sometimes called Professional Learning Communities [PLCs]) are in a particularly powerful position to effect change. These approaches have an impressive research base to support school change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). To realize their potential, schools need to work hard to develop effective PLC structures and help teachers work collaboratively within them.

### Characteristics of Effective Collaboration

Collaboration involves more than cooperation. Collaboration is built on relationships and trust among people who work together for a common purpose. Research and practice indicate that people who collaborate effectively demonstrate a number of characteristics. They:

- orient themselves towards problem solving;
- display mutual respect for each other's knowledge and skill;
- engage in open, honest, respectful discussions and question each other's ideas;
- employ clearly-defined norms that indicate desired behaviors/types of communication that create a safe environment for their shared work;
- identify roles and responsibilities related to specific processes and decisions aimed at positive change;
- use productive conflict resolution processes; and
- share responsibility for participation, decisions, and actions.

Despite the challenging nature of many of these characteristics, they are critical to improving outcomes for all students and they can form the basis for exceptionally strong professional satisfaction (Guarino, Santibanez & Daley, 2006; MetLife, 2009). Many educators, however, have received little or no training in collaboration skills and benefit from professional learning in this area (see the Expertise/Professional Learning section of this document).

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### Essential Elements of Collaboration for MTSS-RtII

MTSS-RtII requires that schools create cultures that embrace change and institutionalize structures that promote teacher collaboration and comprehensive approaches to student learning (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). This collaborative approach often represents a fundamental shift in how schools identify and respond to students' academic and behavioral difficulties, and may require systemic change from an isolated work culture to one in which professionals from diverse backgrounds work together.

### Structures that Support a Collaborative Problem-solving Approach to MTSS-RtII

Collaboration advances the critical components of a multi-tiered system. Successful RtII models depend on a commitment of all professionals, school-wide and district-wide, to collaborate in providing a comprehensive purpose-driven assessment system and high-quality instruction and interventions (see Assessment and Instruction/Intervention sections of this document). All school professionals must commit to creating and supporting a problem-solving approach that enables teachers to learn from one another and promotes professional dialogue among general education, intervention, and special education teachers.

#### Teams

This is typically accomplished through teams. In a systemic approach to RtII, distributed leadership models and professional learning communities support collaborative problem-solving team structures such as data teams, teacher/specialist collaborations, grade-level intervention teams, and educational support teams (Costello, Lipson, Marinak, & Zolman, 2010).

Research suggests that effective teaming has a positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement/behavior. In a multi-tiered RtII process, teams of administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, relevant specialists, and family members meet regularly to analyze student data and instructional practices to determine the needs of their students so that they can respond effectively. Any number of possible structures can support effective team decision-making. Here in Vermont, many schools have turned to Critical Friends (Bambino, 2002) or Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

How do these teams work? Essentially, problem solving teams, which include relevant teachers, administrators, specialists and family members, analyze and discuss assessment information at the school, grade, classroom and individual levels and collaborate about why, what, and how to teach. Educators discuss and make decisions about:

- what students will learn (grade-level/course benchmarks; state standards);
- which culturally responsive, high quality instructional strategies and approaches will be used to ensure that students learn;
- how students' progress and achievement will be assessed within a balanced assessment system;
- how the team and/or others will intervene when students are not meeting benchmarks or are exceeding benchmarks and need additional challenges;
- next steps for individuals and groups of students; and
- what professional learning is needed to improve student outcomes.

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### Parent/family collaborations

Several decades of research suggest that strong partnerships between families, schools, and communities improve outcomes for all students (Comer, 2005b; Kredier, Caspe, Kennedy & Weiss, 2007; Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall & Gordon, 2009). According to a review of research, children perform better when there is strong involvement between home and school. Specifically, students from all backgrounds:

- earn higher grades, test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs;
- are more likely to be promoted and earn credits;
- attend school regularly;
- have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school; and
- graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7).

The research makes evident the fact that school/family partnerships are not just “nice” to develop, but an essential component in strengthening outcomes for all students at all grade levels.

While one body of research has demonstrated the importance of family/school relations, other studies reveal the types of actions that lead to increased parent involvement. High-performing schools engage families and communities in the following ways:

- build trusting collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members;
- recognize, respect, and address families’ needs as well as class and cultural differences; and
- embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In the context of a school-wide systemic approach, these are useful and effective strategies for improving student outcomes by improving family/school partnerships for all students. A number of scholars and practitioners have categorized the types of parent involvement and/or family/school relationships (see Table 2). The work of Joyce Epstein (2002) is often cited and is useful because it focuses attention on the roles and responsibilities of the parents themselves. The National PTA Standards (2009) and research-based work of Heather Weiss (2009) and Ron Mirr (2009) also describe the necessary actions of the school and/or the family/school relationships. As these researchers note, although home–school relationships tend to wane during or even before children reach adolescence, such relationships continue to play an important role in youth outcomes (Harvard Family Research Project [HFRP], 2007; Sanders & Epstein, 1998). Find a comprehensive bibliography on family involvement and adolescence at: <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/publications-series/family-involvement-bibliographies/bibliography-on-family-involvement-and-adolescence>.

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Table 2. Types of Roles and Responsibilities for Parents and for School/Family Partnerships

Types of Parent Roles and Responsibilities	Roles and Responsibilities of Schools and Family-School Partnerships	
<p><b>Epstein et al. (2002)</b></p> <p>Type 1-Parenting: supporting, nurturing, loving, child raising</p> <p>Type 2- Communicating: relating, reviewing, and overseeing</p> <p>Type 3- Volunteering: supervising and fostering</p> <p>Type 4- Learning at Home: managing, recognizing, rewarding</p> <p>Type 5- Decision Making: contributing, considering, judging</p> <p>Type 6- Collaborating with Community: sharing, giving</p>	<p><b>PTA (2009)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming all Families</li> <li>• Communicating Effectively</li> <li>• Supporting Student Success</li> <li>• Speaking Up for Every Child</li> <li>• Sharing Power</li> <li>• Collaborating with Community</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weiss et al. (2009)</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Communication: Systems in place for home-family communication are inviting, useful and set up for two-way communication.</li> <li>2. Information sharing: Families receive the information they need in order to function as an integral part of their child’s school.</li> <li>3. Participation: Family participation programs invite involvement, value parents as key resources and are utilized by the entire school community.</li> <li>4. Welcoming: Parents feel they belong on the school campus.</li> </ol>

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### Parent/family collaborations (cont'd)

When considering these points, schools and districts must give careful consideration to their current context. Fruitful and productive partnerships do not happen without significant work. Reporting on decades of research and practice, Comer (2005b) described how family participation and partnerships evolve over time:

- Level 1:** Parents/families provide general support by attending parent-teacher conferences, monitoring their children's homework, and supporting fund-raising activities. They participate in calendar events, such as school concerts and awards ceremonies. This level attracts the largest number of parents.
- Level 2:** Parents/families serve as volunteers in daily school affairs, for example, by providing office support, going along on field trips, or working as library assistants.
- Level 3:** Parents/families participate in school decision making by serving on the School Planning and Management Team or on other school committees. Parent representation in the governance and management of the school should be as broadly based as possible (School Development Program, 2001).

As important as these are for all schools and families, they are even more critical within a multi-tiered system of RtII. Family partnerships are explicitly addressed both in ESEA (No Child Left Behind) and IDEA (2002). NCLB defines parental involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities.” Parents are described as “full-partners” in their child's education.

In passing the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), Congress stressed: “strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home.” (20 U.S.C. 1401[c][5][B]). Of course, requirements related to parent participation in IEP meetings are detailed and specific (<http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/,root,regs,300,D,300%25E322>). NICHCY (2009) has a very useful parent participation guide. Innovative ideas and research for engaging parents of adolescents in meaningful ways is available in the research brief titled, *Family Involvement in Middle and High School Students' Education* (HFRP, 2007).

Family-school partnerships may change as students access more levels or tiers within MTSS-RtII. Several states (see e.g. Colorado) have created a tiered framework similar to the tiered system of instruction and intervention supports. It specifies which activities and relationships are essential for all families, which are applicable to some families, and which are relevant for only a few families. Schools may find that type of framework useful in their planning and development. In any event, the family-school partnerships should be examined for each of the components of MTSS-RtII. Table 3 on the next page, provides a way to organize self-reflection and action planning about family-school partnerships.

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Table 3. Action Planning to Develop Family-School Partnerships

Components of Vermont's MTSS-RtII	Actions to Support Family-School Partnerships <sup>3</sup>			
	Welcoming Parents feel they belong on the school campus.	Communication Systems in place for home-family communication are inviting, useful and set up for two-way communication.	Information Sharing Families receive the information they need in order to function as an integral part of their child's school.	Participation Family participation programs invite involvement, value parents as key resources and are utilized by the entire school community.
Systemic and Comprehensive Approach				
Effective Collaboration				
High-Quality Instruction and Intervention				
Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment				
Expertise & Professional				

### Learning

<sup>3</sup> These categories are derived from Mirr (2009).